

MANHATTAN PROJECT II

By DANIEL ELLSBERG

The events of the last nine months have created conditions that make 1992, the fiftieth anniversary of the Manhattan Project, precisely the right time to launch Manhattan Project II. The second Manhattan Project should undo the legacy of the first: reduce nuclear weapons to near zero and free the earth from the danger of nuclear war—as completely as possible—by the end of the century.

The era of nuclear threats should end with the Cold War, but that is not what is happening today. The superpower arms race and period of confrontation have come to a close, but the era of nuclear proliferation may be about to accelerate.

The breakup of the Soviet Union brings the possibility of a metastasis of nuclear expertise, materials, technology, and finished weapons. With the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, the danger of a crisis erupting into all-out global nuclear war has diminished drastically. But that very fact reduces inhibitions against making or carrying out threats of nuclear attack in regional conflicts. This impending phase of new proliferation may actually increase the likelihood of accidents, of nuclear terrorism, or of limited nuclear wars—between India and Pakistan, for instance, or a “Yugoslavia with nukes” conflict within the former Soviet Union.

To avert such catastrophes, a number of policies of the nuclear powers

must be changed. A drawn-out, piecemeal approach to change, choosing one or two issues at a time for priority in lobbying, is unlikely to have much effect on proliferation. What is required is a dramatic and comprehensive package of coordinated changes in policies and programs, changes expressing the desire of our society and government to make a decisive shift in our relation to nuclear weapons.

Designing and implementing such a package calls for discussion and analysis, agreement on priorities, and the assignment of tasks and schedules. It will take a focused effort of the highest urgency, reminiscent of the one that launched the nuclear era a half century ago: the original Manhattan Project.

Then the time pressure came from the prospect of a Nazi bomb. Now, as the example of the Iraqi nuclear program warns, the alternative to a successful Manhattan Project II may be a global profusion of new Manhattan Projects.

No new effort can uninvent nuclear weapons, nor can it prevent a later resumption of a nuclear arms race; even physically eliminating all weapons in national stockpiles could not assure that. But it does not follow that anything remotely like the existing arsenals, threatened uses, or levels of danger should be tolerated any longer.

Eliminating nuclear weapons as instruments of foreign policy and achieving the near-abolition of nuclear arsenals are appropriate goals for the end

of this century. Decisive progress in both areas could start this year; it is essential to avert proliferation and to reduce to near-zero the risk of nuclear attacks.

In the long run, is total abolition of nuclear weapons feasible? It seems too soon to answer that question. But if it is too early to make abolition an immediate goal, it is not too early to address the question seriously. The long-run tasks of the project must include an effort to explore the conditions that could make a zero-nuclear-weapons world feasible. One stage in that process might involve international control of all dangerous aspects of the nuclear cycle, including residual nuclear devices.

But long before conditions for total elimination can be met or even agreed on, other important goals are clearly attainable, if the political will can be organized. These must be the main focus of this project.

Manhattan Project II

In contrast to the original, the new Manhattan Project must be overt and international, with Third World participation. Some countries might collaborate in the effort at a high governmental level. But in the United States, participants will have to organize outside of government, at least at first. This is true despite the momentum of the current reciprocal disarmament measures. Welcome as they are, none of the Bush-Gorbachev-Yeltsin proposals (particularly on the U.S. side) shows a decisive shift away from Cold War notions of the broad functions of, and requirements for, nuclear weapons in “superpower” arsenals. And none adopts a posture that discourages proliferation.

Indeed, U.S. policies that encourage proliferation persist. The United States still tests nuclear warheads, insists on its freedom to make first-use threats or to initiate nuclear attacks, and proposes to maintain nuclear “superiority” indefinitely, with a grossly excessive arsenal of thousands of warheads. The United States therefore is in no position to ask any other country to forgo nuclear weapons altogether, to ask other nuclear states to restrain their buildup or use of threats, or to expect adequate international collaboration on enforcement.

The current “supply side” approach

to curtailing proliferation—trying to close off all technological access to nuclear weapons—cannot succeed by itself. Manhattan Project II must seek changes in those official U.S. nuclear policies that increase the demand for nuclear weapons for expanded nuclear arsenals. Such changes will depend on developing a new way of thinking about nuclear weapons among U.S. officials and citizens. The U.S. government must come to accept that if there is any legitimate function for nuclear weapons it is only to deter nuclear attack. As a corollary, the United States should join the Commonwealth of Independent States and nearly all of the non-nuclear states of the world in condemning threats to initiate nuclear attack or the implementation of such “first use” threats as illegitimate.

These restrictions on the functions of nuclear weapons imply a force posture traditionally described as “minimum deterrence.” Herbert York, the first director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, argued in a January 1992 talk at the lab that the number of survivable weapons needed to deter the kind of adversary who can be deterred is far below the level of the 1,000 frequently mentioned. He suggested the number is “somewhere in the range of one, 10, or 100,” and “closer to one than it is to 100.”

Nuclear weapons not needed for this single purpose of deterring nuclear attack should be eliminated from the arsenals of all nuclear states, starting with the United States and Russia. By various reasonable estimates, that means, for the latter states, eliminating more than 95 percent of current stockpiles, or by York’s standard, over 99 percent.

Practical solutions and programs for freeing the world from nuclear threats (and of nearly all of its nuclear weapons) need to be varied, coordinated, and bold. Indeed, it is the complexity of the proposed tasks, and their importance and urgency, that suggest the Manhattan Project as a model—even though the obstacles to nuclear disarmament are more psychological and political than technological.

For opposition to proliferation to be effective, the U.S. government will have to accept reciprocity of inspection and international controls, and it will have to forgo first-use threats, its superior status as nuclear superpower, and

nearly all of its nuclear weapons. Winning official support for such measures will take more than the equivalent of an Einstein-Szilard letter to President Roosevelt. There is no time to lose.

A proposed timetable

What might an overall timetable look like? The original project of 1942—after an earlier gestation period of three years—designed and delivered a bomb in three more years. The following schedule exemplifies the kind of planning and recommendations the new project might produce: It starts with changes in U.S. policy that are prerequisite to more general change.

As soon as possible, the U.S. government should propose registering and tagging all nuclear weapons in the world, including its own. To set a model for reciprocal transparency, U.S. facilities should be subject to the same verification procedures that should be expected of the Commonwealth republics and other nuclear states.

Before the current Russian moratorium ends in October, the United States should join that moratorium and negotiate a permanent comprehensive test ban. As a less preferable alternative, the United States should commit itself to a permanent end to testing by 1995, which would allow time for the limited number of tests—under 10—believed by some to be needed for stockpile safety.

The next target date might be the end of 1993, one year into a new presidential term. By that time, the United States should adopt the principles of minimum deterrence and no-first-use, rejecting in principle and in practice nuclear weapons as instruments of policy or warfare. The remaining devices should be devoted to the single function of deterring nuclear attack.

Also by that time, there should be a U.S. commitment to disable and dismantle—not merely withdraw from deployment—all tactical nuclear weapons, air-launched as well as sea- and land-based. In addition, the United States should commit itself not to resume production of weapons-grade fissionable materials, and to put under international safeguards fissile materials recovered from warheads dismantled in the reduction process. It should seek comparable commitments from other nuclear states.

The United States should commit itself to the provisions of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, narrowly interpreted. It should eliminate multiple warhead (MIRVed) land-based missiles and existing silo-busting submarine-based warheads, and it should seek a mutual interim ceiling on total U.S. and Russian strategic weapons of no more than 1,000 warheads—preferably 500 or 100.

The three-year period of the original Manhattan Project suggests the next target date, 1995—the fiftieth anniversary of the Alamogordo test and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first demonstrations of nuclear destruction. It is also the year of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference, which could mark the beginning of the end of the nonproliferation regime if the programs described here are not achieved.

Mid-1995 should be the deadline for all the nuclear states of the world to:

- End production of weapons-grade fissile material—with its use banned from civilian facilities—and put all production facilities, civilian materials, and fissile materials recovered in the disarmament process under IAEA safeguards.

- End nuclear testing permanently and sign a comprehensive test ban.

- Adopt the principles of minimum deterrence and no-first-use.

- Commit to abolish tactical weapons, which would be totally dismantled by 2000.

- Commit to reduce strategic warheads to 500 at most, and preferably 100 or less in all nuclear states by 2000.

- Adhere to the spirit and the letter of the NPT—seeking universal adherence to it, in the context of these changes—and agree to a greatly strengthened anti-proliferation regime.

If these goals are reached by the end of the decade, the era of nuclear threats will have effectively ended with the millennium. ■

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